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INTO THE LIGHT

OR HOW A BRAHMIN
FOUND THE CHRIST

BEING THE

Life-Story of the Rev. T. K. Chatterji

MINISTER OF THE BHOWANIPUR NATIVE CHURCH, CALCUTTA

TOLD BY HIMSELF

LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY

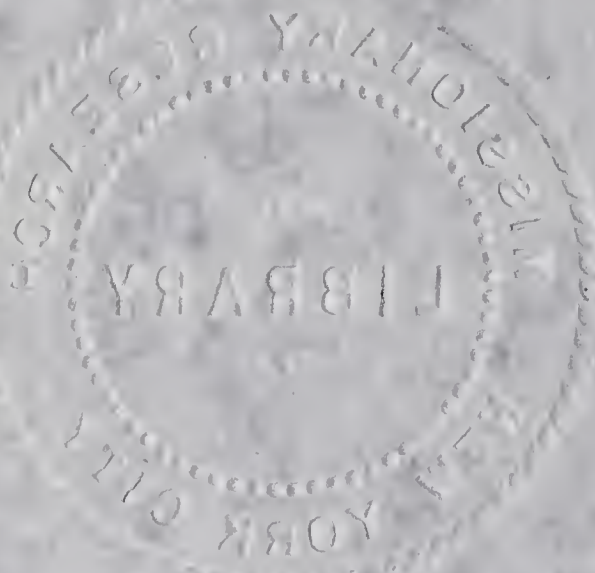
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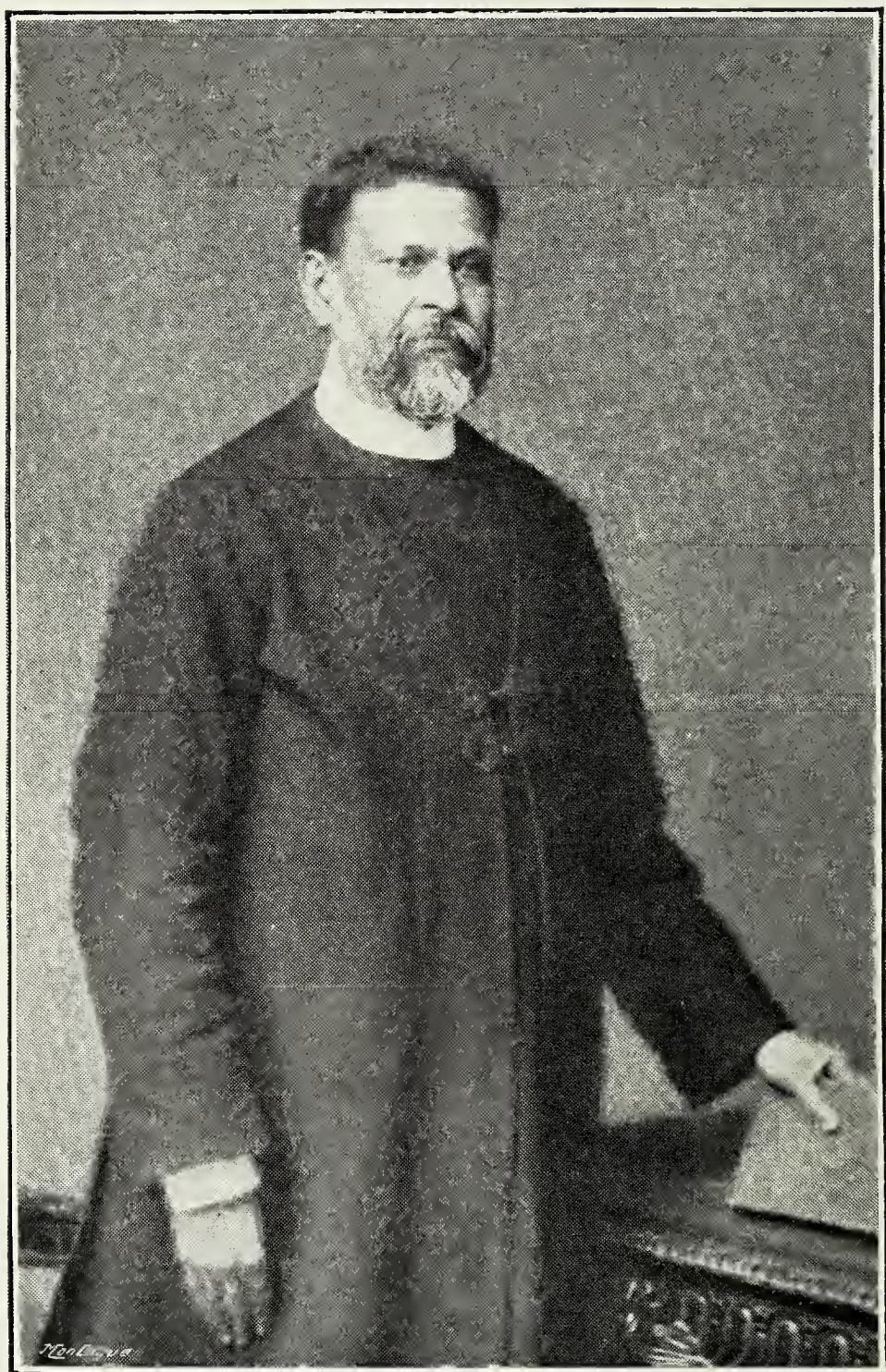


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THE REV. T. K. CHATTERJI.

Into the Light

I WAS born into a high-caste Brahmin family, in a village about 150 miles to the north of Calcutta. Both my parents having died while I was yet very young, I was left to the care of my maternal grandmother, who was a good mother to me. In my childhood I was taught by her to bow down before the numerous Hindu gods and goddesses and worship them. I was told that if I did not thus honour them they would be angry with me and would punish me, either with disease or loss of property and friends, or with death.

This teaching kept me in constant terror of the gods and goddesses, and wherever I saw the idols—under the shade of a tree, or in the temples, or in the shrines—I used to bow down before

them, thinking that this act would please them, and would bring down blessings upon me,—not spiritual blessings, for at that time I knew nothing of spiritual blessings; the only blessings I was taught to care for were health, wealth, learning, and long life.

Thus I passed my childhood, doing what I was told to do and learning what I was taught, till I was eleven or twelve years of age, when the time for the performance of the “Sacred Thread Ceremony” came. Before this ceremony I was not allowed to lead the worship of the gods and goddesses myself; I could only help in their worship by gathering flowers or doing any unimportant work for the priest. But with the Sacred Thread Ceremony (the principal item of which was putting a necklace of white cotton thread round my neck) I was publicly set forth as a Brahmin—one of the “Twice-Born”—and received full authority to perform worship. I was told (and I fully believed) that I now possessed superhuman power, and that the very fire of Brahmo, the first person of the Hindu Trinity,

resided in me. I was also told that if I threw down in anger my sacred thread at the feet of any one of non-Brahmin caste, he or she would be consumed instantly with fire from heaven. I was very glad that my sacred thread conferred this power, and I wished to try it on a playmate of mine who was not a Brahmin, and who used to bully me sometimes in the playground! Meeting him first after I had received my thread, I gave him warning of what might happen to him should he trouble me now, but he took no heed and continued to treat me as before.

One day I had a quarrel with him, in the course of which he gave me a few blows, and I was so enraged that I instantly took the extreme measure—in fact, I was seeking an occasion for it and got it soon. I took off my sacred thread and threw it down at his feet, fully expecting that he would be destroyed in a moment. The only result, however, was that I received one or two more blows from him. He then left triumphantly, amid the laughter of his comrades and my utter confusion.

I returned home crying and told my grandmother what had happened. I was rebuked for parting with my sacred thread, which was soon replaced, and my grandmother went to expostulate with the mother of the boy who had insulted me. Nothing but angry words came of her visit and there the incident closed.

So I learnt that I was just like other boys, and that the wonderful power which I thought my sacred thread had conferred was but a myth and a delusion.

After a year or two, another thing happened which shook my faith in Hinduism. At the annual festival in connection with the worship of Mahadeva, as we call Shiva, one of the great Hindu gods, my uncle was the officiating priest. But as he had urgent business in another village, he asked me to attend to the worship on one particular day. I was told to place a few sacred leaves and flowers on the head of the idol, and, taking my sacred thread into my fingers, to repeat the *Gyatri* (the sacred words of the Brahmin) before the idol. While I did this, the devotees

were to shout outside the temple, taking the name of the idol, asking him to bless them; and this they were to continue to do until the leaves and flowers fell down of themselves from off the idol's head. The falling down of the leaves and flowers would be taken as a sign that the idol was pleased with the worship. If they did not fall down a great calamity was to be apprehended.

I did as I was directed. I selected some of the choicest leaves and flowers, and after I had immersed them in the holy water of the Ganges, as I was told to do, I placed them on the head of the idol and began to repeat the sacred words of the Brahmin used in the worship.

I continued repeating the sacred words for about two hours. But the leaves and flowers would not fall down! It was a very anxious time for the devotees. They began to shout more and more, and at last accused each other of some ceremonial sin on account of which, they thought, the sign of divine favour was not granted.

It was getting dark, the people became very excited, and I was at a loss to understand what

to do next. At this juncture my uncle came and took my place, and after having purified himself by sprinkling the holy water over his head, began to repeat the sacred words. I was watching him very closely and noticed that while he was repeating the words he lowered his head towards the idol, and with a breath of his mouth blew away the leaves and flowers.

When I saw this, I muttered to myself, "If this was the way, why did you not tell me before? I would have finished the worship in a moment!"

I left the place in disgust, but said nothing to any one, for fear of my uncle losing his income from the worship. After a time I went to live in another village in a different district of Bengal, where a rich Hindu friend of one of my uncles kindly offered to pay for my education and provide me with board and lodging in his house. I took my place in the local Vernacular School, and within three or four years' time I successfully passed a Government examination.

At this time I received no religious instruction. I used to read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two great epic poems of the Hindus. But I read them more for the sake of amusement than for religious instruction. The friend in whose house I was living was a rigid orthodox Hindu, and was the principal leader of a Religious Association started by him for the preservation of the Hindu religion in his village. But I received no spiritual help either from him or from his Association.

In those days there was no Christian missionary living in that district, nor was there any regular Christian work going on. I remember meeting once with two Christian missionaries, who, I afterwards learnt, belonged to the London Missionary Society, and who came there in the course of their itinerating work from Calcutta. I heard them preach in the local market and received from them a few Christian tracts and a copy of a gospel. I only glanced over these, and then put them aside for fear of being found out by my Hindu friend.

A Colporteur of the Bible Society, whose home was at Bhowanipore, and who belonged to the London Missionary Society, used to pay periodical visits to our village ; but I did not then take much interest either in him or in his work. I had not then much regard, it is true, for Hinduism, but I never thought that I should become a Christian, for I was not prepared either to lose my caste or to be disowned by my own people.

While living in this village I became acquainted with two or three young men who were more advanced intellectually than I was, and who had some sympathy with the teachings of the Brahmo leader, Keshub Chandra Sen. I was attracted to them by what I heard about their religious views. They did not believe in idolatry, but believed in one God, the Maker of heaven and earth, to Whom prayer might be made in one's own language.

While I sympathised fully with these views I remained a Hindu outwardly. There was no Brahmo-Samaj, or Church, in our village, nor

was there any one to lead us. We used to meet as often as we could find opportunities to talk over religious matters. Once we met under the leadership of an advanced Brahmo who happened to come to our village on business, and discussed with him as to the best religious book in the world. The Brahmos, or Theists, in India have no religious book of their own. They read the Bible of the Christians, the Vedas of the Hindus, Koran of the Mohamedans, Zend Avesta of the Parsees, and the Granth of the Sikhs, and get instruction from all these faiths. We wanted to know the best religious book of all, so that we might apply ourselves particularly to the study of that book. What we heard from our visitor led us to give our united verdict in favour of the Christian Scriptures.

From this time I became earnestly desirous of procuring a copy of the Bible for myself. One day I went to the local market and found, to my great joy, the Christian bookseller whom I knew previously. When I asked him for a

copy of the Bible, he was surprised and wished to know why I wanted it. I told him that I would like to read his Bible, so that I might know of the truths about the one true God. He could see that I was serious in my request, and very gladly sold me a copy of the Bengali Bible, which I began to read with great avidity.

But after reading the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis, I was greatly disappointed and thought my friends must have made a mistake in believing that the Bible was the best religious book in the world. For I took Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Rebecca and others to be the Christian gods and goddesses, and found that the stories about them were no better than those of the Hindu gods and goddesses.

I therefore put the Bible aside in disgust and never intended to read it again. At this time the late Babu Keshub Chandra Sen paid a visit to a neighbouring village, and held a meeting there, to which some of my friends went. After the lecture there was a feast provided, at which all, without distinction of caste

—people of high, low, superior or inferior caste
—sat down together.

When this was known in our village there was a great stir made about it. Our guardians and teachers punished us and thenceforth kept a strict watch over us. We could no longer meet together and hold religious discussion as we used to do, and I avoided my friends altogether, not wishing to be identified with Brahmos any more, for fear of my Hindu friend on whom I was entirely dependent for my food and lodging, and indeed for everything.

But this agitation against the Brahmos soon subsided and after a time the people thought no more about it. A few months after this, the Christian bookseller from whom I bought the Bible, paid frequent visits to our village, accompanied by another colporteur, and by preaching and selling Christian books and distributing tracts succeeded in getting several young men of our village interested to some extent in Christianity. The upper-class people of the village were bitterly opposed to the

Brahmos, but they were, at that time, not so bitter against Christians, the reason probably being that they never thought that any one belonging to them would ever become a Christian and lose his caste altogether. Hence they did not take much notice what the Christian bookseller, who was not a man of much education, was doing.

When I heard that several young men were taking some interest in the Christian teaching, I made up my mind to oppose the Christian bookseller by writing against the Bible. I took up my pen and wrote several articles, setting forth the sins committed by Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and others. In these articles, I urged my friends not to listen to the Christian preaching or to buy the Christian books or to have anything to do with Christians.

I had no money to print these articles, nor did I know of any newspapers in which they could be published. I therefore used to make several copies of my articles with my own hand, and distribute them among a few of my friends.

While doing this I met my Brahmo friend again, whose advice had led me to read the Bible. I told him all I had read, and what I was thinking about it, and also what I was doing to oppose the Christian bookseller. He showed me how foolish I was to judge of a book by reading a few pages only, and advised me strongly to read the Psalms and Gospels before giving it up.

Following his advice, I read a few of the Psalms and the Gospel according to St. Matthew. I was so delighted with them that for some time I read nothing but these books. I felt that the Book which contained the Psalms and the Gospels must be the best religious book in the world, and that there must be some explanation of the stories I had read in the Book of Genesis. But who would explain that to me? There was no Christian missionary living at hand to whom I could go, and my Brahmo friend lived in a distant village, so that my opportunities of meeting him were few and far between, and I dared not open my mind to any one else.

In this difficulty it came to my mind that I

would take God for my teacher, and ask light and guidance from Him. So I took to prayer, and my prayer at this time was very real and earnest—such as I never prayed before. I could not say much ; in fact, I did not then know much to say in prayer. I could only say, and say it from the very bottom of my heart, “ *O God, show me Thy truth and lead me !* ”

While I was in this state of mind, I met quite unexpectedly the Christian bookseller. I had a talk with him, in the course of which he explained to me that Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and others of the Bible characters, were but sinful men of like passions with ourselves, but they were saved by the grace of God, and if we, like them, had faith in Him, we also would be saved through His grace.

This explanation satisfied me, and I determined to know as much of the Bible as I could. Oh ! how I enjoyed reading God’s holy Book ! It became a new book to me, and the more I read it, the more eager I became to know all about it. Sometimes I used to spend the greater part of the

night in reading the sweet stories about the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Thus by reading and prayer I was gradually led by the Spirit of God to see my own sinfulness, and the all-sufficient grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to save me from my sins. I trusted in Him for my salvation and fully resolved to follow Him at any cost.

While I was thinking of taking the final step, I heard that two Christian preachers had come to our village and were living in a tent. I took the earliest opportunity of seeing these men, and in the course of a conversation, I opened my mind to them. They encouraged me, and told me that if I would accompany them to Calcutta, they would introduce me to the Christian missionaries, who would be glad to give me further instruction in the religion of Christ. I promised to consider their proposal, and after we had had prayer together, I left them. One thing struck me very much while I was with these preachers. It was their love for their servant. I noticed that whenever there was an occasion for them to call him, they would do so in an affectionate tone, as one

would call one's own child. This was altogether new to me. When I saw the Christians treating even their menials with such love and affection, I reasoned in my own mind that love must be the ruling principle of their life, and that I could only be happy in their company. So, after much thought and prayer, I decided to go to Calcutta with them, and accordingly made known my decision on the next evening. They were very glad to hear of it, and encouraged me in every way. They prayed with me, and we talked over various matters till late in the evening, when they arranged to meet me at the nearest railway station at 10.30 on the following morning.

I returned to the house of my Hindu friend and went to bed, but could not sleep much. I spent almost the whole night in reading the Bible and in prayer to God, my Heavenly Father. It was a very anxious time with me—a time of hard struggle concerning all that was very near and dear to me from my birth—caste, society, friends and relations, and specially the love of my grandmother—the hardest struggle of my life. I

knew very well what following Christ meant, that I should be cast off by Hindu society, and that my own people would consider me as dead to them. Thank God, His grace sustained me in this struggle, and caused me to triumph over every difficulty and hindrance, and my heart's desire to follow Christ fully was granted by Him in a most wonderful way.

As previously arranged, I came to the railway station, not at 10.30 a.m., but at 11 a.m. My late arrival was due to the fact that I was asked by my Hindu friend to do a certain piece of work for him on that very morning, which I did not like to refuse, just when I was leaving him for good. I knew that I was late, and was almost expecting to find that my Christian friends had gone. But God so ordered it that the train on that day did not arrive till after 11 a.m. I and my Christian friends saw clearly God's hand in this little incident and thanked Him for His intervention on my behalf.

One of the preachers with whom I came to Calcutta was the late Mr. Umesh Chandra Mu-

kerjee, an evangelist of the London Missionary Society, who, after rendering faithful service to our Society for some years, has entered into his eternal rest. He introduced me to the missionaries at Bhowanipore, and one of them, the late Rev. J. E. Payne, after giving me further instruction in the Bible for some time, baptised me on the 19th of February, 1871, in the Bhowanipore Congregational Church, the pastorate of which I have had the privilege and honour of holding for the last fourteen years.

When the news of my baptism reached my village, the people, including my own friends and relations, became very angry, and tried their best to persuade me to go back to Hinduism. They could not bear the thought that one of them, a Brahmin, should become a Christian. But in the midst of all these temptations and trials God gave me grace to stand firm, and has been giving His grace ever since to His unworthy servant to bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus.

This is the simple story of a Hindu youth, who

found Christ through reading the Bible and getting such instruction in the truths of God as was available to him in a backward village of Bengal. The story will be incomplete, however, without a few words as to what I have been doing since I have found the light of the Gospel.

After my baptism in 1871, I was appointed sub-editor of a Christian weekly paper started by Mr. Payne. This was the first cheap Bengali Christian newspaper published by our Society in Calcutta. It had a good circulation, and did useful work in preparing the way for other more important Christian newspapers.

In 1872 I became a student in the Society's Institution at Bhowanipore. In 1876 I was accepted as a Theological student, and after undergoing the full course of theological training I was appointed an Evangelist of our Society.

As an Evangelist I used to give scriptural lessons to the boys and young men in the class rooms of the Bhowanipore Institution, and also to take part in the open-air and other evangelistic services in and around Calcutta. During holiday times I

undertook missionary tours in the villages to the north-east of Calcutta.

In 1882 I was ordained to the ministry and was transferred to Kaurapukur, the headquarters of the Society's South Village Mission. There are several out-stations connected with this mission, each with a Christian congregation. My work there was pastoral, educational, and evangelistic. As Pastor I had the oversight of nine churches. The members of these churches and congregations are either illiterate or very poorly educated. Rice-cultivation and fishing are their only means of livelihood. Though their condition is so poor, and though we have to deal with men the greater number of whom are mere babes in Christ, yet I must say that there are some with whom to talk to is to enjoy heaven on earth, and you cannot but love them and long for their company.

It has also been my privilege to take part in the work of preaching the Gospel to Hindus and Mohamedans. While out on tours, one of our chief methods is to sing the glad tidings to the

accompaniment of Bengali music. Sometimes in entering a village we form a procession. At the head of the procession two of our party hold flags in their hands, bearing such mottoes in large letters as—"JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONLY SAVIOUR OF SINNERS." "REPENT YE, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND." Others play on a Bengali musical instrument, while the rest of the party sing of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. By this and various other means the Gospel is being preached in the towns and villages of India, and wherever we go we meet with willing listeners, and with a cordial and hearty reception.

In 1889 I was invited to become pastor of the Bhowanipore Congregational Church in Calcutta. Since July, 1891, this has become an entirely self-governing and self-supporting church. The substantial brick-built building, erected about 34 years ago at a cost of about £1,150,* in which we assemble for worship, is the property of the people themselves, who also keep it in repair. This is

* Towards this amount the Society in London contributed £150.

the only true Congregational Church that we have in Bengal, and is, we hope, an earnest of many such strong churches that will be planted all over India. The number on the roll of membership is 146, and the strength of the whole congregation is over 400. It has supplied, and is still supplying, almost all the higher grade Bengali agents of the London Missionary Society.

Two years ago, when the church heard that the Society's work was much handicapped owing to a very serious deficit in its funds, they raised a sum of nearly £22 by a special effort. Of course, this was but a small sum, but even the ocean is made up of drops, and if all the children of God bring in their "drops," God's work will not suffer for lack of funds.

It has also been my privilege to help in literary work. I was the editor of the Scripture Union Bengali Magazine for children for about eleven years, and also was the chief editor of a Bengali weekly, published by the Christian Literature Society for some time. I have translated Pike's *Early Piety*, and John Angell James' *Anxious*

Enquirer, and have written or edited a number of other Christian books and tracts.

During the last 32 years I have thus been engaged in direct Christian work in some capacity or other.

As a Christian teacher, Evangelist, Missionary, Pastor, and writer, I have gained a varied experience of the work in India. I may tell you, from my own personal experience, that missionary work in many parts of India was never more hopeful than at the present day. Christ is honoured and admired by every educated person in India. The whole country is open for Christian work. English education, and contact and intercourse with the West, have brought new light and new ideals of life to the Indian people, and our educated men and women are not satisfied with their own religion. They are in search of some holier, purer, and truer form of religion. Many of them have openly forsaken idolatry, and have become Brahmos or Theists. But without Christ I believe they can never be satisfied.

May the Lord bless us all, in England and

India, in rich abundance, and give us His grace to be true and obedient unto Him. And may His holy name be glorified in and through us, among all the nations of the world !



